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The North African Franchise: AQIM's Threat to U.S. Security

Strategic Insights, Volume VIII, Issue 5 (December 2009)

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Strategic Insights is a quarterly electronic journal produced by the Center for Contemporary Conflict at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Abstract

Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is a growing and evolving North African franchise of Al Qaeda. While the group carries out a significant number of attacks within the Sahel, they have not executed attacks in the United States or Europe. There is significant research concerning the historical development of AQIM. However, there is a dearth of literature on the threat that this group poses to the United States. The purpose of this paper is to fill this research gap and evaluate the threat that AQIM poses to US security. My analysis will demonstrate that AQIM's operations in Europe and Iraq are a security threat to US facilities and personnel. Moreover, this paper will demonstrate that AQIM has both the intent and capability to conduct attacks against US targets in Europe, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Introduction

In February 2007, a group calling itself "Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb" claimed responsibility for an attack in which six vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) detonated in towns east of Algiers. Although this attack officially marked the emergence of Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a North African franchise of Al Qaeda, this group is the product of decades-long development of Islamist groups in Algeria. The merger of AQIM and Al Qaeda in 2007 demonstrated Al Qaeda's new trend of creating regional franchises across the world. Furthermore, this partnership precipitated an internationalization of AQIM's goals and operations.

The majority of literature and research on AQIM focuses on the historical transformation of a state-centric Algerian Islamist group into an international franchise of Al Qaeda. Blake Mobley and Eric Rosenbach of the Center for Policing Terrorism track the development of AQIM from its origins as the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in the 1990s to its partnership with Al Qaeda in 2007.^[1] Mobley and Rosenbach also analyze the training methods, means of finance and modus operandi of the group. Camille Tawil, in a piece published in the Terrorism Monitor, analyzes the transformation of AQIM strategy and tactics in the wake of 9/11.^[2] Yet another piece on AQIM, written by Anthony Celso and published in Mediterranean Quarterly, expands on the themes that Tawil discusses in her article.

Celso analyzes AQIM in the broader context of the post-9/11 Al Qaeda strategy of creating franchises in Islamic countries.^[3] There are a multitude of other research pieces on AQIM, but they do not address the threat that AQIM poses to US security.

Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
<p>Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.</p>				
1. REPORT DATE DEC 2009	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2009 to 00-00-2009		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The North African Franchise: AQIM's Threat to U.S. Security			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
			5b. GRANT NUMBER	
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
			5e. TASK NUMBER	
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Naval Postgraduate School,Center for Contemporary Conflict,1 University Circle,Monterey,CA,93943			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
14. ABSTRACT				
15. SUBJECT TERMS				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 7
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON	

This paper will address this demonstrated research gap and analyze the danger AQIM poses to the United States. First, this work will describe the development of Islamist groups in Algeria that resulted in the creation of AQIM. Second, even though AQIM does not pose an immediate threat to US homeland security, an analysis of AQIM operations in Europe and Iraq will demonstrate the threat to US security interests abroad, specifically, US government facilities and employees overseas.

Historical Development of AQIM

The emergence of Islamic extremist groups in Algeria traces back to the formation of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), established by mujahedeen returning from Afghanistan in the early 1990s. FIS, a legitimate Islamic political party, led in the 1991 Algerian general elections after the first round of voting. However, rather than allowing an Islamist party to rule the country, the Algerian military nullified the elections. This action precipitated the formation of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) by members of the FIS party, and this newly-formed Islamist organization focused on the overthrow of the Algerian government. Furthermore, the cancellation of the 1991 elections sparked a civil war fought between the GIA and the government that continued until 1997.

The end of the Algerian civil war and simultaneous outrage over civilian casualties led to dissent among GIA members and the ultimate formation of the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). Initially, GSPC operations were state-centric and focused on overthrowing the government and establishing an Islamic government in Algeria. However, by 2006 the group's leadership developed a new strategic vision that involved regionalizing and globalizing GSPC operations and attacks. After years of overtures to Al Qaeda, the GSPC announced its partnership with Al Qaeda and new name of AQIM in December 2006. In September 2006, Ayman al Zawahari officially confirmed the partnership and new North African franchise of Al Qaeda. After the partnership, AQIM and its leader Abu Musab Abdul Wadood regionalized and globalized its operations.

Since 2006, 96 AQIM attacks have occurred outside Algeria.^[4] Moreover, since 2006 the tactics of AQIM increasingly take the form of Al Qaeda-style attacks. Specifically, AQIM has begun to utilize VBIEDs and suicide bombings. Examples of the new modus operandi include the simultaneous December 2007 VBIED attacks against a UN facility and the Algerian Constitutional Court in Algiers that killed 47 people.^[5] More recently, in September 2008 five of twelve AQIM attacks that occurred in Algeria were either VBIEDs or suicide bombs.^[6] While the partnership with Al Qaeda introduced a new goal of attacking western targets outside Algeria, AQIM has not executed attacks outside of Algeria thus far.

AQIM Operations in Europe

The ubiquitous presence of AQIM cells in Europe represents a significant threat to US security. Algerian Islamist groups established cells in Europe as far as back as the GIA in the early 1990s. Both the geographic proximity and the 9.1 million Algerian immigrants living across Europe allowed these organizations to establish cells across Europe.^[7] After the splintering of the GIA, the GSPC requisitioned most of the GIA cells located in major cities across Europe. Since the collapse of the GSPC, AQIM has gradually taken over the Algerian Islamist network throughout Europe.^[8] As a result, AQIM rapidly spread in the late 1990s, and the extent of its architecture was revealed in 2000 during a multitude of arrests in Italy, France and Spain. These arrests broke up three major operational cells that were together planning to bomb a French market.^[9]

Today, AQIM operates a widespread and coordinated structure across Europe. While the majority of their attacks and operations occur inside Algeria, AQIM maintains a widespread network of financial support and direct action cells outside the country. Terrorism analysts estimate that several dozen cells exist across Europe, primarily in France, Germany, Spain, Italy and the

United Kingdom. French authorities estimate that there are over 5,000 AQIM sympathizers in France and approximately 500 dedicated cell members.^[10] Additionally, EU authorities estimate that AQIM has substantially reinforced its presence in Germany and Italy since 2003.^[11] A major task of AQIM cells in Europe is the financial support of the group's operations worldwide. AQIM's primary means of finance are car theft, credit card fraud, document forgery and the active seeking of donations. AQIM is extremely successful collecting donations in Europe, and in 2006 AQIM received 100,000 Euros in donations in Switzerland alone.^[12]

Another focus of AQIM cells in Europe is recruiting Algerian immigrants to fight. French authorities assert that several AQIM cells within France are actively recruiting volunteers for the Iraq jihad. Moreover, Spanish media outlets reported in April 2007 that AQIM supporters were collecting funds and recruiting volunteers for terrorist training in the mountains of Algeria.^[13] A final focus of AQIM in Europe is the planning and execution of attacks against European targets. AQIM does not hide its intention to carry out attacks against European targets. In February 2005, for example, Al Qaeda leader Ayman Zawahiri urged AQIM to be a "bone in the throat of American and French crusaders."^[14]

More recently, AQIM issued a new threat to France in response to a new French law banning the wearing of head scarves by Islamic women. AQIM leader Abdul Wadood stated in June 2009 that "we will avenge the honors of our sisters and daughters, on France and its interests in every way we can."^[15] These statements clearly demonstrate AQIM's intentions to carry out attacks against European targets. In December 2006, French authorities raided a suspected AQIM safehouse and seized goggles, global positioning systems and weapons-making equipment.^[16] This discovery confirmed European fears of the existence of AQIM direct action cells in Europe. Therefore, AQIM currently has both the cell structure and intention to carry out attacks in Europe.

The robust presence of AQIM in Europe is a threat to US security. Specifically, the presence of direct action cells in Europe places US governmental facilities and personnel at risk. Due to post 9/11 security measures, it is increasingly difficult for terrorists to carry out attacks in the United States. However, it is far less difficult for AQIM to attack US targets in Europe. AQIM can infiltrate operatives in Europe or utilize its pre-existing network to execute attacks on US facilities and personnel. For example, the primary Moroccan terrorist cells that carried out the 2004 Madrid train bombings crossed into Europe from North Africa. Due to the open border arrangements of the European Union (EU), once terrorist operatives enter the EU they are able to move freely within the EU.

Additionally, French security analysts describe the ease at which AQIM members with dual citizenship can legally travel between France and Algeria.^[17] The 2000 arrest of a GSPC cell in Italy that planned to bomb the US embassy in Rome further demonstrates the threat that AQIM poses to US personnel and facilities in Europe. These planned operations indicate AQIM's desire to attack US infrastructure and personnel within Europe. This tactic also mimics the Al Qaeda strategy of striking at US targets in foreign countries, such as the 1998 Al Qaeda bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. These sites are easier to access than targets in the United States and do not require an infiltration of fighters into US territory.

In addition to the threat of an attack on US assets in Europe, the omnipresence of AQIM in Europe exacerbates the threat of an attack on US soil. While infiltrating the United States is increasingly difficult in the post-9/11 era, there are several instances of AQIM cells in Europe planning attacks on US soil. For example, in December 2005 three AQIM operatives were arrested by police in southern Italy while plotting attacks against ships, stadiums and railway stations in the United States.^[18] The network of AQIM in Europe is an immediate and short-term threat to US homeland security as well as to its personnel and infrastructure in Europe. While AQIM has not successfully carried out an attack against a US target, it has both the intent and capability to execute such an operation.

AQIM Operations in Iraq

The operations of AQIM in Iraq represent a threat to the United States. Specifically, the funneling of Algerian jihad recruits into Iraq threatens US forces and operations. According to comments by senior US military officials, Algerians comprise approximately 20 percent of all Al Qaeda-affiliated fighters in Iraq.^[19] Furthermore, Saudi Arabian intelligence estimates that in 2006 approximately 1,200 Algerians were fighting with Al Qaeda in Iraq.^[20] Not only are Algerian fighters present in Iraq in high numbers, they also participate in important operations for Al Qaeda in Iraq. For example, US forces killed two Algerians who facilitated communications between AQIM and Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and directed numerous bombings in Mosul.^[21] Furthermore, AQIM operatives assassinated two Algerian diplomats in Baghdad in 2005.^[22]

The high number of Algerian fighters in Iraq results from the effective recruiting and channeling of individuals from Algeria. The primary focus of operations of AQIM in Algeria is attacking Algerian and western personnel and facilities. However, a secondary mission of AQIM is the active recruitment of young Algerian men to fight with AQI against US forces. This latter mission is largely due to Al Qaeda's influence on the organization. Moroccan academic Muhammed Darif argues that "Al Qaeda's priority in North Africa is to recruit fighters for Iraq....it is part of its strategy to win the war in Iraq."^[23] AQIM has a widespread recruiting network within Algeria that is deeply entrenched within Algerian society. AQIM focuses much of its recruiting efforts on family members of its current operatives. Additionally, the group conducts recruiting at cyber cafes and mosques. For example, in October 2006 Algerian police arrested six AQIM members who were visiting mosques and persuading unemployed youth to fight in Iraq. In 2006 Algerian authorities arrested 120 AQIM-affiliated individuals in Algiers suspected of actively recruiting Algerians to fight in Iraq.^[24] There also cells in Iraq responsible for receiving recruits sent by AQIM. For example, in 2005 the Syrian government deported Adil Sakir al-Mukni, a key facilitator between AQI and AQIM, for helping shuttle foreign fighters into Iraq.^[25]

Since 2008, many Algerian fighters have returned home from Iraq. This change is largely due to the tapering off of US operations in Iraq and the renewed focus of AQIM on overthrowing the Algerian government. The return of experienced fighters from Iraq has also brought the use of new and more devastating tactics, such as VBIEDs and suicide bombings, to Algeria.^[26] However, the active recruitment of Algerians to fight in Iraq continues and is still a direct threat to US forces. Moreover, the recruiting methods and infrastructure established by AQIM could be used in the future to send Algerian fighters to Afghanistan or to other US military areas of operation.

Conclusion

AQIM is the outcome of years of development of Islamist groups in Algeria. AQIM is also one of the most glaring examples of the franchising of Al Qaeda. While there is significant research on AQIM's development and transformation, there is a dearth of literature on the threat AQIM poses to the United States. This paper demonstrates AQIM's threat to US security and highlights the need for policymakers to address this potential threat. AQIM operations in Europe and Iraq threaten the security of US government facilities and personnel overseas. Also importantly, the potential shift of AQIM operations from Iraq to Afghanistan could severely undermine Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). In conclusion, the United States and its allies cannot take the AQIM threat lightly and should note that AQIM is growing and evolving to be more widespread and integrated with international terrorism.

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